

# Bildung, Self-cultivation, and the Challenge of Democracy: Ralph Waldo Emerson as a Philosopher of Education

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**Abstract:** The present paper investigates Ralph Waldo Emerson's contributions to the philosophy of education, focusing on his concept of Bildung, or self-cultivation, and its relevance to democratic life. The conflicts between the individual and the community, the inner and outer selves, and the particular and the universal are all skillfully navigated in Emerson's writing. His idea of education as a self-cultivation process that challenges conformity and promotes both individual and group transformation relies heavily on these dichotomies. The study makes the case that Emerson's anti-foundational response to these conflicts provides insightful advice for modern education, especially in light of democracy. The study emphasizes the continued importance of Bildung in tackling the issues that contemporary democratic societies face by reinterpreting Emerson's concepts. Emerson's thought encourages people to participate critically in their societies, viewing education as a political project that aims to transform the individual as well as the larger social structure.

**Keywords:** Emerson, Bildung, Self-Cultivation, Democracy, Philosophy, Education.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Renowned for his significant contributions to the philosophy of education, Ralph Waldo Emerson—a pivotal figure in American transcendentalism—is especially known for his notion of Bildung, or self-cultivation. Emerson's educational theory is firmly anchored in the conflicts that exist between the particular and the universal, the individual and the community, and the inner and outside self. His conception of education, which he saw as a process of ongoing self-improvement and human evolution rather than just the transfer of knowledge, depends critically on these tensions. Emerson's beliefs challenge conventional notions of education by emphasising the importance of individuality, freedom, and the critical role that life events play in shaping a person's personality and worldview. In light of democratic societies, this paper looks at how Emerson's anti-foundational approach to these conflicts provides practical guidance for modern education. The paper aims to reinterpret and revisit Emerson's views in order to argue that Bildung, as he envisioned it, is a political endeavour that fosters critical involvement within communities and contributes to the continual evolution of democracy, in addition to being a path to personal development.

## 2. DISCUSSION

Ralph Waldo Emerson, though widely admired for his contributions to American culture and literature, has historically been underrepresented in professional philosophical discussions, particularly in the philosophy of education. Despite this, Emerson's influence on figures such as Nietzsche, Dewey, and others is significant ((Kovalainen, 2012). His philosophy of Bildung (self-cultivation) was shaped by both European and American thinkers and, in turn, influenced them. Nietzsche's *Schopenhauer as Educator* is notably indebted to Emerson, echoing his idea that education is about self-discovery and liberation rather than mere instruction.

Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul' (The divinity school address, 80).

Ralph Waldo Emerson views education as a philosophical process of self-cultivation, where individuals are responsible for their own personal growth. This perspective begins with introspective questions like “Where do we find ourselves? (Experience, 1983)” suggesting that education involves both enculturation through others and self-driven development (Bates, 2012). A central theme in Emersonian education is the tension between dependence on others for provocation and the individual's own efforts to cultivate themselves. This dynamic is reflected in various life aspects, including inheritance, language use, scholarly identity, and the interplay between the personal and political realms. These tensions are experienced in everyday life rather than being mere intellectual concepts.

Stanley Cavell has played a crucial role in revitalizing Emerson's status as a serious philosopher within academic circles. Cavell emphasizes Emerson's anti-foundationalism, coining it “Emersonian perfectionism,” which rejects the notion that education is simply about acquiring knowledge or finding secure external foundations. Instead, education is about orienting oneself and discovering one's identity through lived experiences. Cavell argues that Emerson's philosophy highlights education as a journey of self-discovery and personal orientation, rather than the accumulation of justified true beliefs. This approach underscores that true education involves both the influence of others and the individual's active role in shaping their own understanding and existence. Consequently, Emerson's ideas present education as an ongoing, dynamic process of finding oneself through living, emphasizing personal responsibility and the integration of external influences with internal growth.

At first glance, both Emerson's idea of self-cultivation and the German concept of *Bildung* might seem overly individualistic. However, a deeper examination reveals that Emerson's approach is far more nuanced and complex. Emerson navigates and positions both himself and his readers within various tensions, such as those between the individual and the community, the private and the public, the inner and the outer, the universal and the particular, as well as inheritance and transformation. These tensions are central to the discussions in this special issue, where contributors explore how these dualities shape the concept of education. By emphasizing these intricate dynamics, Emerson's philosophy transcends simple individualism and instead presents a more interconnected view of self-cultivation that acknowledges the interplay between personal development and broader societal influences.

In the first paper of the special issue, Claudia Schumann delves into the contemporary discourse on *Bildung*, highlighting the tension between critical and recuperative perspectives. She argues that Emerson's reinterpretation of *Bildung* offers a foundation for developing the concept of ‘aversive education,’ which challenges *Bildung* itself by emphasizing its political aspects. Drawing on Aletta Norval's view of democracy as aversion to conformity, Schumann suggests that envisioning a different self and community beyond the present is crucial for the ongoing renewal of democratic dialogue, allowing it to adapt and include voices currently marginalized.

Niklas Forsberg continues this exploration by examining the tensions Emerson navigates, particularly in the context of learning from teachers. In Forsberg's view, teachers serve as exemplars not for the content they teach but for the process of learning to express oneself in a language that, while inherited and shared, becomes uniquely one's own. He argues that true self-cultivation involves not just personal growth but also the cultivation of a shared public world. Forsberg contends that the traditional divide between inner and outer, private and public, is not simply bridged by self-cultivation but rather dissolved through it. Forsberg further challenges the notion of ‘self-reliance’ suggesting that there is no fixed self to rely on. Instead, self-cultivation, when seen as a form of perfectionism, acknowledges the inherent imperfection in the process. Emerson, as interpreted by Forsberg, destabilizes the idea of a perfect state to which one might conform, proposing instead a vision of the self as always in motion, perpetually striving toward perfection but never fully arriving. Thus, education as self-cultivation is framed as a process of relying on a self that is continually evolving, always in the process of becoming (Johansson 2022).

Naoko Saito, in her contribution, explores the contemporary relevance of Emerson's and Thoreau's writings by examining Cavell's interpretation of their transcendentalism as a form of perfectionism. She engages with Dewey's view of Emerson as a philosopher of democracy and Cavell's reading of the Hollywood comedy *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. Through this, Saito delves into the role of political emotions, particularly happiness, in democratic life. She argues that Cavell's (and Emerson's) philosophy draws its political power from personal and private emotions, without overlooking the fragility of the public sphere. Saito emphasizes that private emotions, like happiness or unhappiness, should not be excluded from political discourse or discussions of justice. Instead, these emotions shape and transform public discourse when expressed. Education, therefore, involves the cultivation of both the public and the private, occurring in unexpected moments when emotional speech is voiced. This blending of the personal with the political underlines the importance of emotions in shaping democratic life and the conversation around justice.

Heikki Kovalainen probes into the tensions between the inner self and the outer world in Emerson's essay *Culture* emphasizing their relevance to education and self-cultivation. He argues that Emerson's views on education, while seemingly similar to Dewey's, are distinct, especially in how Emerson's concept of self-cultivation diverges from the German tradition of *Bildung*. Emerson is not only interested in cultivating the self but also in how this process connects the self intimately with the world. Kovalainen highlights Emerson's religious sensibilities, portraying his self-cultivation as a means to achieve a religious vision of life and the world that transcends specific denominations.

Viktor Johansson shifts the focus to the idea of *Bildung* as wild wisdom particularly in the context of early childhood education. He explores how children, through their playful and improvisational interactions with the world, inherit, learn, and creatively use language. By bringing Kant and Emerson into conversation, Johansson examines Emersonian self-cultivation as a form of improvisatory or wild *Bildung* that can help recover a "wild gaze," enabling individuals to transcend the conformities imposed by their inherited traditions. This perspective offers a fresh way of reading Emerson's essayistic writing as a response to the values embedded in pre-school curricula. Together, these discussions by Kovalainen and Johansson underscore the multifaceted nature of Emerson's educational philosophy. They illustrate how Emerson's ideas about self-cultivation and *Bildung* challenge conventional educational practices and offer new ways of thinking about the relationship between the individual and the world, as well as the role of improvisation and creativity in learning.

Paul Standish explores Ralph Waldo Emerson's work through the lens of Cavell's concept of perfectionism, particularly focusing on the issue of race in Emerson's writings. Standish examines how Emerson's essays, especially *Experience* blend philosophical prose with poetic expression, treating the essay as a linguistic experiment. He interprets these language experiments as part of a perfectionist pursuit of an ideal, yet unrealized, America—a 'new, yet unapproachable America.' Standish also delves into the tension in how Emerson's work has been received, where he is often seen either as promoting crude American individualism or engaging with the complexities of collective and individual identity. By analyzing Emerson's influence on African-American philosophical and literary traditions, Standish reveals the suppressed experimentalism and richness of Emerson's writing. He highlights Emerson's critique of the American Constitution, emphasizing its foundations in the repression of the Black community, and reinterprets this as a perfectionist call to rebuild America. Standish argues that this narrative offers a crucial education in moving beyond the current societal shame to advocate for a more just and equitable future.

The contributors to this special issue emphasize the complexity and unresolved tensions in Ralph Waldo Emerson's work, particularly the dichotomies between the individual and the community, the inner and outer self, and the particular versus the universal voice. These contrasts, described by Sandra Laugier as "the central enigma of politics (Laugier, 2015)" reflect the intricate nature of human life and political thought. Rather than offering simple resolutions, Emerson's essays serve as explorative journeys through these enigmatic landscapes. This issue seeks to understand Emerson's anti-foundational approach to these tensions, suggesting that his perspectives on *Bildung* (self-cultivation) and democracy are particularly relevant in contemporary times. Emerson's work invites a reconsideration of the role of education, self-cultivation, and democratic engagement, particularly in resisting conformism and fostering both individual and communal transformation.

In the context of today's shifting educational and political landscapes, the contributors argue that Emerson's notion of *Bildung* offers valuable insights. His approach to self-cultivation, evident in both the content and style of his writing, is framed as a political endeavor—a struggle against societal norms and an effort to reshape both the self and the community. By revisiting and reinterpreting Emerson's ideas, this issue aims to provide a fresh perspective on how *Bildung* can help address contemporary challenges in democratic societies, encouraging individuals to engage critically with their communities while also contributing to their transformation.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Focusing on the contradictions between the individual and the community, the inner and outer self, and the particular versus the universal voice, the writers of this special issue examine the complexity and unsolved tensions in Ralph Waldo Emerson's writing. Known by Sandra Laugier as 'the central enigma of politics' these differences highlight how complex political philosophy and human life are. Emerson takes an anti-foundationalist stance, and his essays reflect this by being exploratory voyages through these mysterious landscapes rather than straightforward answers. According to the article, Emerson's views on democracy and *Bildung* (self-cultivation) are still quite applicable today. Through his work, the importance of education in promoting individual and collective transformation and opposing conformism is questioned. Emerson's concept of *Bildung* provides important context for understanding the rapidly changing political and educational

environments of today. His writing style and subject demonstrate his approach to self-cultivation, which is perceived as a political project including a struggle against social conventions and an attempt to transform the individual and the community. The contributors hope to offer a new perspective on how Bildung may solve current issues in democratic nations by going back and reinterpreting Emerson's views. By encouraging people to engage critically with their communities and contribute to their development, this interaction shows how Emerson's thought is still relevant today in promoting a more dynamic and just democratic life.

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